JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

PETER DeLAURENTI

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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: Peter DeLaurenti

INTERVIEWER: Phil Webb

INTERVIEWER: This is an interview with Mr. Peter DeLaurenti for the Joliet Junior College Oral History Program by Phil Webb at Mr. DeLaurenti's home in Joliet, Illinois, March 29, 1977 at 2:00 p.m.

WEBB: The first thing I'd like to ask you is where you were born?

DeLAURENTI: I was born in Grosse, Kansas, and from there we moved to Terre Haute, Indiana. And from Terre Haute, Indiana, we came to South Wilmington, Illinois.

WEBB: What remembrances do you have of your childhood?

DeLAURENTI: Well, I remember just a little bit in South Wilmington. I wasn't there too long. And from there I came into Joliet to the Guardian Angel Home -- Orphanage.

WEBB: What kind of schools -- did you go to school then?

DeLAURENTI: I went to public school in South Wilmington and I went to the school at the orphan's home itself.

WEBB: How many grades did that go up to?

DeLAURENTI: That went up -- normal there was eighth grade. The girls at the orphanage went to three years of high school, and because I drove the car, I went to two years of high school there and then I left.

WEBB: And you left there. You said you were in the orphanage home. How long did you live there?

DeLAURENTI: I was there about six or seven years.

WEBB: Do you remember what kind of games you played? Did you guys have any special games you played in your childhood?

DeLAURENTI: At the orphanage we had a baseball team. We had, oh, everything the outside world had. As a matter of fact, I think we had it a little bit better than the outside world because at that time it was Depression days, and out there we didn't have that worry. We had, actually, I think, more that the normal kids outside had. It's surprising, but it's true.

WEBB: What was your first job then when you got out of high school?

DeLAURENTI: Well, when I left the orphan's home, I went down to Marseilles, Illinois, and lived with a couple. I went to the last two years of high school there, and they owned a grocery store and a gas station. I worked at the grocery store and gas station after school, and then when I left there -- after I graduated -- I came back into Joliet and worked in a grocery store.

WEBB: What were some of your wages at that time?

DeLAURENTI: Oh, I don't quite recall what the wages were at the store. I do recall what it was after I got my job at the bakery as a driver. That was 34, 35 years ago I started at the bakery. I've been retired 2½ years and I worked there 32½ years, so it's about 35 years ago, and the wage at the bakery at that time as a driver was $32.50 a week plus commission. And with the price of bread then, the commission didn't come to much. Now it's $196, plus commission, and it was at that time, if we made $75 a week,it was a good week. Now the average wage over there is

very close to $400 a week.

WEBB: We'll get back to that later. I'd just like to ask you a few other questions about your school years. What kind of classes did you have back then? What were your basic classes, and . . .?

DeLAURENTI: Well, at the orphan's home we had one teacher that taught all -- everything -- in the school, everything in that grade. And when I went to Marseilles, then we went from classroom to classroom. We didn't have shop like they have now. We had almost everything else, and Latin. We didn't have Spanish and that. About the only other language was Latin.

WEBB: What kind of books -- did you have to buy your own books, or did they furnish the books?

DeLAURENTI: We bought our own books. At that time there was no such thing as the school furnishing books. You bought your own books and everything.

WEBB: Do you remember maybe some of the prices you paid for some of those books back then?

DeLAURENTI: No, but your paper and pencils were about the same as they are now. Pencils were cheaper, two for a nickel. Now I guess they're three for a dime or a nickel apiece.

WEBB: Yes, they're up quite high.

DeLAURENTI: But there's not that much difference, I don't think, as far as the paper and the pencils were concerned.

WEBB: How long did you go to school during the day?

DeLAURENTI: We got in school at eight o'clock and about three o'clock I'd be home. We'd have lunch.

WEBB: Did you have recesses?

DeLAURENTI: We had recesses, but at that school -- I don't know if any of the other schools had it -- we didn't have any lunch room or anything. We went home for lunch, or you brought your own.

WEBB: So with school, did you have any problems with transportation then?

DeLAURENTI: We walked; that was the only way. They didn't have busses at that time for school kids.

WEBB: Did you have a bicycle or anything when you were young?

DeLAURENTI: Yes. We had bicycles, but I -- for school, we'd usually walk.

WEBB: You say you travelled. How did you travel back then, and did you have a car to travel, or was it like. . .?

DeLAURENTI: Oh, we had cars. We had cars in Marseilles. A family had a car. And the kids at school, some of them had cars. The restrictions on driving weren't like they are now. Almost anybody could drive as long as they could turn the key and steer -- they could drive. No licenses were required, no nothing. No teaching as far as the school on driving; you just rode with somebody and you drove. I'll never forget the first time I drove.

WEBB: How was that?

DeLAURENTI: Well, I drove for the orphanage and . . .

WEBB: What age were you at this time -- do you remember?

DeLAURENTI: I was about 15 years old. And a man took me out. We had an old truck there at the orphanage, and he took me out and showed me how to steer and shift, etc., and so on. And I drove it around a little bit and it was just a couple of days later that the priest who lived at St. John's in town, he took me along and we drove to St. John's and he turned the car over to me and says, "Take it back." And I had one heck of a time taking it back. /Laughter/ Cause I went up -- at that time you didn't have the automatic shift, see -- it was a stick, and I had to go up a slight incline and stop and then try to get back up, try to get it in gear and try to get it started again. And I had a lot of fun. I backed against a curb and got it going.

WEBB: Did you have a lot of accidents back then? Was there a lot of traffic on the roads?

DeLAURENTI: There wasn't as much traffic as there is now, no. But there was traffic. Of course, at that time your city limits ended, oh, right out by Black Road, and so you didn't have too far to go and you're outside of the city limits, and you weren't in any heavy traffic -- not the way the orphanage is now. I was way out in No Man's Land.

WEBB: What orphanage was that?

DeLAURENTI: Guardian Angel. That's way out on Plainfield Road by Hillcrest. Now, see, there's homes all the way out there. At that time there was no homes out there.

WEBB: Whatever transportation did Joliet have besides cars?

DeLAURENTI: Streetcars. They had streetcars at that time. They had those going all over, even into Chicago and Aurora, out to New Lenox.

WEBB: Did you ever ride it to Chicago, or New Lenox?

DeLAURENTI: I never rode it into Chicago, but into Morris and back, and around town (Joliet), but into Morris, I didn't.

WEBB: What was it like, riding one of those?

DeLAURENTI: It was fun. Just sit there and when you got to the end of the line, all they did was switch the seats around, or turn the car around. Some places they would turn the car, some places, why, they'd just switch the seats back and they just actually backed up, or they went either way at just the same speed -- either way.

WEBB: Another question I want to ask you here. What did you guys do for entertainment?

DeLAURENTI: Well, it was mostly sports. That's about the only thing that there was to do. There was movies and sports.

WEBB: You say the movies -- Do you remember some of the prices you paid to get into some of those movies?

DeLAURENTI: Ten or fifteen cents. Nothing like today. Actually, you'd go -- now, we say, nothing like today; of course, your wages weren't anything like today, either. They talk about inflation, but I think if they actually figured out what the wages were at that time, or what the prices are this time, I think we're farther ahead.

WEBB: You also said sports. Did you get a bunch of guys together then

and play your sports?

DeLAURENTI: Now, in Joliet here, of course, most of it was at the orphan's home, like I say. After I came back to Joliet, I had to make my own living. That was a year after high school, cause I had no parents, and so I didn't have too much time for anything but work. But down in Marseilles, heck, you could, in the town at that time -- if you wanted to do something, go on a picnic or anything -- all you did is get on the phone and in fifteen minutes you'd have a gang, because they're all ready, always ready to do something. They didn't have a car of their own or something to do all the time like they do now. They were always glad to get together to do something.

WEBB: You say you supported yourself -- Where did you first live then when you came back up here to Joliet?

DeLAURENTI: When I came up to Joliet, I started working -- well, I got the job before I left there, actually. I worked at a store on Jefferson near Raynor; it was a grocery store. And then from there I went to work on Cass Street. I worked there until just before the war (W. W. II) started, and I went on the banana route. Then from the banana route I went onto the bread route, and ... Wait a minute -- I worked at a gas station for a little while there -- then I went on the bread route, and I was on there 32½ years until I retired.

WEBB: Have you lived here all your life since coming up to Joliet?

DeLAURENTI: No. We lived out on Washington Street. We lived on Cass Street above the store for a while and lived on Washington Street for, oh, a couple of years, and then we came here.

WEBB: So you've lived here most of your life, then?

DeLAURENTI: Yes. Most of my life was right here.

WEBB: I see you have a creek behind your house. Did you use that for a lot of enjoyment?

DeLAURENTI: No. When we came, that creek was all done with the enjoyment part. They tell me that previous to that, years ago, there was fishing there and swimming there; but since we came, well, it hasn't been any good for either fishing or swimming. Oh, it is cleaner now than it has been in, oh, the last 20 years; but it will take a while for it to get back to what it used to be. There's too many people living along it now. And too much dirt being washed out from these other small towns. They tell me that Hickory Creek at one time was -- right up by the bridge -- just up here from us -- used to be a good swimming hole.

WEBB: When did you get married?

DeLAURENTI: In 1939.

WEBB: How many children do you have?

DeLAURENTI: Five. Four girls and a boy. Two of the girls are twins. The boy's right in the middle.

WEBB: When you got married, did you have to have your license, the wedding license and the big ceremonies, and stuff like that?

DeLAURENTI: When we got married, you went down and got your license; you didn't have to worry about the blood test then... Yes -- we did have to have a blood test. Then when we got married, we got married at the church.

We didn't have a big wedding. We had a big reception, but it wasn't like nowadays; they seem to want to spend a lot of money, and we didn't.

WEBB: How did you and your wife get through the Depression years?

DeLAURENTI: Well, when we got married, the Depression was actually over. Like I said, during the Depression years, I was out at the orphan's home. The only way it ever effected me, really, was when I graduated from the eighth grade out there. I won a scholarship to high school and college. And that Depression, when it hit, wiped the man out that was giving this scholarship; and I never did get it. I actually lost out on it. But that's the only way it really effected me. We didn't feel it out at the orphan's home, like I said, like most kids did. We had out there, oh, anywhere from half-a-dozen to a dozen Christmas parties every year. Different clubs, different associations, would come out and when we'd end up after Christmas, we'd have our lockers full of fruit and toys. And I'll never forget the Fourth of July. Nowadays you can't have anything but sparklers -- and I don't even know if you can have those any more -- but out at the orphanage, we were shooting out six-inch firecrackers. We'd blow the ground apart and they thought nothing of it!

WEBB: Did they furnish you with the fireworks then?

DeLAURENTI: Different stores in Joliet would bring them out, and when I say "bring them out", they'd bring them out by the big boxful. Oh, you'd hear them all day long, and we had out at the orphan's home -- they had their own fireworks display with the skyrockets and all that, right out in front. We had people coming from Joliet to watch them. But this would be all furnished by different merchants. They'd just bring it out and give it to us.

WEBB: You said something about the war. Did you have to go to the war?

DeLAURENTI: I missed it by, oh, about a month. I went over age. So I never really had to go into the war. My son went into this last one. But I never did have to go.

WEBB: Getting back to the bakery now -- you said you started in the bakery some 35 years ago. What was your first job -- was it a truck driver?

DeLAURENTI: I started into -- well, truck driver is actually what we were. It's salesman more than truck driver, and our title was salesman until during the war. Then it was changed to truck driver, and then, after the war, it was changed back to salesman because during the war a salesman didn't have any way of getting out of service, but a truck driver was essential, so they let them go along with it.

WEBB: What did your wife do? Did she ever have a job or anything? Or did you do all the supporting?

DeLAURENTI: I did most of it. She worked for just a little while. But she had enough to do taking care of the kids.

WEBB: Do you remember -- how was the elections here in Joliet? Did you get to vote and stuff?

DeLAURENTI: Well, since we were old enough to vote, we always voted.

WEBB: Was it age 21?

DeLAURENTI: Yes, it was 21 then.

WEBB: Getting back to the Hickory Creek -- this is the Hickory Creek

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here flowing behind your house, isn't it?

DeLAURENTI: Yes.

WEBB: Have you ever had any problems with the creek?

DeLAURENTI: Oh, we've been flooded. We've had floods, oh, I'd say about four times. We have pictures of it where it went over the top of the wall. We've had water in our basement every time that it went over the wall, but since they broke the ledge off down at the -- where the creek empties into the waterway -- we really haven't had any trouble with it.

WEBB: So you never really had any property damage besides your basement flooding?

DeLAURENTI: Just that. That's all... No, no, I did have dirt washed out. We had just finished digging, by hand, a swimming pool, and we didn't have it lined or anything yet when the flood hit. And the swimming pool was about, oh, I think about eight feet wide and about twelve feet long. After the flood, it must have been about twenty-five feet long. The water just kept washing it out. And so we had to bring in a lot of dirt to fill in. As a matter of fact, I think I brought in about forty loads of dirt before I finished filling the hole. Not only the hole, but I raised my whole yard up some.

WEBB: So that was really the only damage you had as far as the creek goes?

DeLAURENTI: Yes. As far as we were concerned, that's about the only damage. Minor damage -- we had things that we got hurt in the basement

-- film and pictures, and stuff that we had stored down there, but nothing major. See, we're -- it's a little bit different. When you know you might get flooded, you don't keep those things in the basement. We don't have a recreation room in the basement because we know we might get water there. Now if you lived in a place where you don't have the creek going over, you might have a recreation room. If the water ever comes in, then you do get hurt; but we've never kept that much in the basement. We always knew when that water was coming up, and we'd go down and pull the fuse box, pull the switch on the fuse box, so there'd be no electricity, no shorts or nothing. It just got to be a habit. We knew we better do it because we had the experience once before.

WEBB: I also see that you live right down from a tavern. Has that tavern been here since you've moved here?

DeLAURENTI: The tavern was here way before we moved in. It was run by the father of the one that owns it now. And when the father died, the boy took it over.

WEBB: Have you had any problems with it?

DeLAURENTI: We really haven't had any problems with it except during the last, oh, year. Some of the people, when they leave now, don't know how to shut up. They forget that other people are sleeping when they leave. It's gotten a little out of hand.

WEBB: Has anybody ever complained about it? Has anybody ever said something to him to try and change it?

DeLAURENTI: Well, I don't think anybody has ever said anything to him. It never bothered me that much. It bothered the wife and her father and

some of the other neighbors. They'd complain, but it doesn't do any good.

WEBB: Okay, just a few more questions. You said you had a car, so then you really did all your traveling by car throughout Joliet? Was that your main transportation?

DeLAURENTI: Yes, that's your main method of transportation.

WEBB: Could people afford to buy a car then? Were cars expensive?

DeLAURENTI: They weren't really expensive by our standards today. By our standards then, they were really expensive. Very few teenagers or even young married couples had a car because they just couldn't afford it. It kind of irritates me, like I said before, when they talk about this inflation; now you can save money if you're careful, but then you couldn't because . . .

WEBB: You came back and said something about inflation and stuff. Maybe we could elaborate on that -- maybe from the presidents from -- say the presidents of today and the presidents, say, maybe thirty years ago. Do you think they're maybe the same, or would you say you've . . . There have been real good presidents back then. Can you remember any one particular one that you liked?

DeLAURENTI: The one that pulled us out of the Depression by radical means was Roosevelt, but he took radical steps -- closing the banks and actually starting all over again. That's why I think maybe Carter with his radical steps he's taken now might do the same. Too many of them were, I think have been -- like Hoover was -- they go away and never did go away. Just hoping that inflation, hoping that the Depression

would end, hoping that unemployment would end, and it wouldn't. Even though it might be the wrong move, I think it's better to do something rather than to just sit back and wait for something to happen. Roosevelt took some crazy things. Another thing that he did was WPA. If they wanted to work, they would find him a job.

WEBB: With the prices of everything today, I was wondering if you could maybe make some comparisons with the prices, say, maybe back then to what they are today.

DeLAURENTI: Well, there aren't too many that I remember. I had pictures of our store with the prices of what things were then. One of them I remember was coffee at that time sold three pounds for 39¢. Now it's about $4 a pound. When I started on the bread route, the wholesale price -- I'll give you the wholesale price because I don't know about the retail price -- I can tell you, too, the retail price on a loaf of bread was 10¢. That was for a pound loaf and now at the store where I'm at now we're selling that same loaf for 33¢, so actually it's gone up, it's a little over tripled its value. Your canned vegetables don't seem too much different, maybe they're doubled in price. Some of your speciality items are higher, quite a bit higher. Your big increase has been in your frozen food items, milk, butter, eggs, meat, of course, but there is again supply and demand. I can't see too much big increase in comparison to what they're making now.

WEBB: What about the price of land, since we talked earlier . . .?

DeLAURENTI: Land is skyrocketed. That's one thing that has gone way up. Your housing has skyrocketed. I can tell you what I paid for this house here. I paid $5900 for it.

WEBB: Was this house already built? Did you buy this?

DeLAURENTI: No, it was already built. I've done remodeling, but the house itself and the land, everything on it cost me when I bought it, $5900. At that time -- that's about thirty years ago -- you could buy this house for, oh, ten to fifteen thousand dollars -- a real good house.

WEBB: With the prices of today, this house is well worth over $30,000, isn't it?

DeLAURENTI: Oh, yes, yes. It's insured now for $35,000. That's what the insurance appraiser values it at. But that's one thing that's gone way high and there again I think it's your land is getting scarcer and scarcer; and the scarcer it gets, the higher the prices get.

WEBB: With your house then do you have a lot of public utilities?

DeLAURENTI: At the time we bought our house, yes, it had all the public utilities. Ever since I can remember -- way back before I went to the orphan's home, I can remember that house that we lived in, but ever since I've been at the orphan's home and after that, everything's modern. You didn't have the electrical coffeemakers and things like that that you do now. But you had your electric lights, your sewer and water and heating, and very few homes had gas heating. It was usually coal or stoker. This house had a stoker in it at that time. Now you don't see stokers any more because of the coal. It was modern in the way it is now -- it's just a little more sophisticated now is all.

WEBB: What were the roads like then -- while we're on the subject? What kind of roads did they have?

DeLAURENTI: They had paved roads. I believe it was back when Len Small was governor that Route 6 was partially a brick highway. Individual bricks were laid, and they say that's because some relative or friend of his owned a brick yard. But I believe Center Street, if I remember right, had a brick street. The roads were mostly paved. They weren't as wide as they are now. There wasn't a four-lane highway. Route 30 years ago, that's even before I started going out that way, going to New Lenox, it was only one-lane. Then they added a second lane. Washington Street here had the streetcar tracks running down the center. Matter of fact, they're still there, but they're covered. They never did pull those out. A lot of the streets in Joliet, I imagine, still have the old streetcar tracks underneath because it cost too much to pull them out and they'd just put a street over the top.

WEBB: Getting back with all these roads -- when you drove the truck, did you just drive in the Joliet area, or did you have to go to other cities?

DeLAURENTI: You mean on the bread route?

WEBB: On your bread route, yes, correct.

DeLAURENTI: Yes, when I started, I went all the way over to Crete, Steger, Chicago Heights, Flosmoor, New Lenox, Frankfort, Matteson, all those towns. I covered -- at that time I got up at 2:30 in the morning and I got home about five o'clock in the afternoon.

WEBB: That's a long day.

DeLaurenti: Just before I retired, I'd start about five-thirty, six

o'clock, and if I wanted to, I could be done at noon. Where two of us went east of Joliet, I believe now there's ten routes going east of Joliet. They just combined them. Just two or three towns because all your small stores have disappeared. Instead of four or five small stores in the town, there's usually just one big one. Your neighborhood stores in Joliet have all disappeared. There's very few neighborhood stores; they can't compete. So if wages go up much higher, they're going to more than compete -- they're going to chase the big ones out. Your wage scale in the grocery store now has gotten to a point where your independent doesn't go on to a union, where -- some union guy hear me talking like this, he'll get mad -- but the union has raised the prices up so much that it's actually chasing some of the chain stores out of business. That's why your National's have gone out. A lot of your A & P's have closed. I know of a few others that are going to be closed within the next year as soon as their lease runs out because their wage scale; they can't compete with the independent.

WEBB: Getting back to when you drove your truck route, did you have to take the bread in -- did you handle the money? Did you set up the displays?

DeLAURENTI: We handled everything. When we left in the morning, we checked our load. Say we had $100 worth of bread on there. When we came in, we either had $100 or money, or money and bread left. But it was up to us. If we started off with, say, $100 worth of bread and we only came in with $90 in cash and no bread left on the truck, then we had to pay up the $10. We were charged with that load as it went out.

WEBB: Did you have to set up the displays in the grocery stores?

DeLAURENTI: Yes.

WEBB: Did you need any special training, or did you just go in there and set it up yourself?

DeLAURENTI: When you started off, you had a supervisor riding with you for anywhere from a week to a month, depending upon how long it took you to learn how to do it -- to figure your prices, to display your spot. Our company had what they called a "route book". In that route book it practically told you everything you had to know, what you had to know,on how to run that route. It told you how many spots you had on the shelf and how much they normally used, and so on and so forth. And if you went by that, you could run pretty close on it.

WEBB: Now that you've retired from the bakery, do you work anyplace else?

DeLAURENTI: Yes. I retired and took my pension. I sat around and didn't really do anything for about a month and a half, and I got itchy. Somebody offered me a job and I took it.

WEBB: So where do you work now?

DeLAURENTI: I'm working at a store in New Lenox as a produce manager. I'm produce manager and assistant manager in the store. That's where I am now.

WEBB: Do you enjoy doing that?

DeLAURENTI: Yes. I took the job with the understanding that if I wanted to take time off, I could; and if I wanted to come home early, I could; if I got tired, I could; and that's exactly what they told me. They left it up to me. As long as I get my work done or get somebody that will do

it. I more or less manage it, and if I want to take a couple of days off, I can. I'm paid by the hour, whatever hours I want to put in.

WEBB: It sounds interesting. And now I'd like to thank you for this interview.

DeLAURENTI: I was glad to do it, and I hope they learn something.

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